Mere sanctity

Mere sanctity: The Victorian canonisation of Richard Baxter

'It was enough for one age to produce such a man as Richard Baxter'. Such were the words of Dr Wilkins (1614-72), the seventeenth-century Bishop of Chester. Indeed Wilkins claimed that if Baxter had lived in primitive times he would have been one of the Fathers of the Church.[1] Throughout the century we find similar notes of high esteem pouring forth from the pens of Anglicans and nonconformists of all stamps. For Baxter's own father his son was 'sanctified from the womb'. At his funeral sermon his friend, the leading Presbyterian, Dr William Bates (1625-99), remembered him as 'this excellent saint', whose preaching was 'animated with the Holy Spirit, and breathed celestial fire' and whose 'prayers were an effusion of the most lively, melting expressions, of his intimate, ardent affections to God'.[2] For the celebrated nonconformist minister Matthew Sylvester (1636/7-1708) he was another

[1] Cited from Joseph Read, 'To the reader', in Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption* (London: John Salusbury, 1694), p A4.

[2] William Bates, *A Funeral Sermon for the Reverend, Holy and Excellent Divine, Mr Richard Baxter* (London: Brabazon Aylmer, 1692), pp. 89, 91, 114, 123. Cited from William Orme, 'A life of the author and a critical examination of his writings', in Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orme, 23 vols (London: James Duncan, 1830), i, pp. 407-8.

Elisha,[3] and for the latitudinarian Archbishop John Tillotson (1630-94), he was one of God's 'greatest saints', worthy of comparison with Luther, Calvin and even the Apostle Paul.[4]

Clearly, Baxter was revered as a saint even in his own lifetime. While for Puritans the term 'saint' was strictly a biblical one, referring to any elect believer, it is difficult to elude the sense that Baxter was regarded as no ordinary saint. Moreover, such devotion to Baxter was hardly confined to his own century. If anything, as we shall see, it only became more extravagant with time, reaching its zenith in the Victorian age. Indeed, it was in the long nineteenth century especially that Baxter came into his own. For by the mid nineteenth century, both widening confessional divides within the Church of England and the increasing opposition between churchmen and nonconformists left all parties scrambling to construct and defend their own spiritual lineages. Baxter's unique life, ministry and doctrine meant that he could be claimed by everyone. He thus could be portrayed, somewhat bewilderingly, as a staunch Anglican, a Broad Churchman, a founder of the evangelical movement, an inspiration for the Methodists – John Fletcher (bap. 1729, d. 1785) called Wesley the 'Richard Baxter of our age' – and the father of liberal nonconformity.[5]

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[3] Matthew Sylvester, *Elisha's Cry after Elisha's God Consider'd and Apply'd with Reference to the Decease of the Late Reverend Mr Richard Baxter* (London: T. Parkhurst, etc., 1696), p. 14. Cited from Orme, 'Life', p. 406.

[4] John Tillotson, 'Letter to Matthew Sylvester', in Frederick Powicke, *The Reverend Richard Baxter under the Cross (1662-1691)* (1927; Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2009), pp. 11, 298-9.

[5] John Fletcher, *A Vindication of the Rev. Mr Wesley's Last Minutes* (1771; London: R. Hawes, 1775), p. 44. For a discussion of Baxter's influence on early Methodism see Ralph

This chapter seeks to examine the reasons for Baxter's universal appeal, examining the ways in which different groups took him up and canonised him as a saint. It charts the way in which Baxter came to be regarded not only as a man of exemplary holiness, and thus as a visible link between heaven and earth, but also as a prophetic figure, revered across denominational divides precisely because he was perceived as speaking so directly to the problems and aspirations of the age.

2. A Protestant and evangelical saint

Pervading eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of Baxter, just as those of his own contemporaries, is an awareness of the heavenly, even unearthly, quality of his life and writings. To many he appeared as a prophet, an apostle or even an angel amongst ordinary men and women. His own life of devotion and self-sacrifice was thus seen as mirroring that of the Apostle Paul or Christ himself.[6] Indeed, so greatly was he revered by his followers, that the term 'Baxterian' became a commonly-accepted designation for those moderates seeking a *via media* between the extremes of Calvinism and Arminianism.[7]

Waller, 'Converging and diverging lines: Aspects of the relationship between Methodism and rational dissent', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 53 (2001), 81-92.

[6] See, for example, 'Review: the life and times of Richard Baxter', *Imperial Magazine*, 12 (1830), 954, 958; 'The Practical Works of Richard Baxter', *Edinburgh Review*, 70 (1839-40), 189-90, 196; A.P. Stanley, 'Richard Baxter', *Macmillan's Magazine* 32 (1875), 389-92; John Tulloch, *English Puritanism and its Leaders: Cromwell, Milton, Baxter and Bunyan* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1861), p. 387.

[7] For discussion of Baxterianism see Geoffrey Nuttall, *Richard Baxter and Philip Doddridge: A Study in Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). The inheritance of Baxter's

In some cases veneration of Baxter even reached the heights of Catholic devotion. Thus we find evidence of one man who held his name in such reverence that he would always refer to him as 'holy Mr Baxter'.[8] Likewise, Lord Somers's grandfather was buried in the graveyard at Kidderminster due to his belief that its very turf had been hallowed by Baxter's sanctity.[9] Baxter's writings were a subject of special devotion. Many of his admirers revered them next only to the Bible itself, while Henry Venn (1725-97), the famous evangelical, even went so far as to call them holy relics, comparing them to the bones of Elisha in the Old Testament and depicting them as *loci* of extraordinary spiritual power.[10]

Notable here is the way in which traditional, Catholic categories of sanctity of life and sanctity of writings – in other words Tradition – were retained or redeployed in order to demonstrate Baxter's credentials as a Protestant saint bringing heaven down to earth. In particular, the eliding of the distinction between Baxter's words and the biblical Word, points to ways in which English Protestantism, especially of a more evangelical stamp, was seeking to construct its own notion of Tradition, and even its own communion of saints, through

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thought in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is discussed by Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: Volume 1, Whichcote to Wesley: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.89 ff.

[8] B. Fawcett, 'Preface', in Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, ed. B. Fawcett (1759; London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1872), p. xvii.

[9] Richard Cooksey, *Essay on the Life and Character of John Lord Somers* (Worcester, for the author, 1791), p. 19.

[10] Henry Venn, *The Conversion of Sinners the Greatest Charity* (London: S. Crowder, etc., 1779), p. 20.

recording the historical unfolding and personal instantiation of biblical truth. If this was still something of an unconscious move on Venn's part, later in the more polemical climate of the later nineteenth century securing a lineage became very much a conscious necessity, as Roshan Allpress shows for the Wilberforcean ideal of the 'practical saint' elsewhere in this volume.[11] Baxter's writings, understood as the historical embodiment of the timeless Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, could thus be interpreted as a vital link in the chain of 'evangelical succession'.

Yet that succession in itself was often highly contested, most notably between evangelical Anglicans and nonconformists. Due to his unique role in the crisis of 1662, as the most steadfast and heroic, but also most reluctant of dissenters, Baxter could be, and frequently was, appealed to by both parties. While all drew inspiration from Baxter's heavenly life and his selfless love for Christ, their use of Baxter clearly also registered their own concerns and priorities. In particular, their different ecclesiological loyalties could lead to different interpretations of Baxter's own actions and especially of the spiritual legacy he bequeathed to the troubled nineteenth-century Church. At times this led to open conflict. Indeed, the paper war between Canon John Cale Miller (1814-80) and the Congregationalist R. W. Dale (1829-95), in which Baxter and other dissenters became pawns in the political and ecclesiological controversies over the bicentenary celebrations of 1662, bears eloquent

[11] See further Gareth Atkins, '"True churchmen"? Anglican evangelicals and history, c. 1770-1850', *Theology*, 115 (2012), 339-49 and Timothy Larsen, 'Victorian nonconformity and the memory of the ejected ministers: the impact of the Bicentennial commemorations of 1862', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church Retrospective*, Studies in Church History, 33 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 459-73.

testimony to this divisive potential.[12] In other, happier times, however, more irenic and reflective tendencies won out. Then Baxter's role as a tireless promoter of Christian union could be used to bolster a united evangelical front.

One of the most important nonconformist attempts to appropriate Baxter in the nineteenth century can be seen in the writings of the Scottish Congregationalist William Orme (1787-1830), whose 1830 edition of Baxter's *Practical Works* quickly became the standard work. In his works the tension over Baxter's double identity as an establishment evangelical and a nonconformist becomes fully apparent. A notable populariser of the Puritans – he also produced an edition of the works of John Owen – Orme held Baxter out to his readers as a shining example of practical Christian living. He thus notes his ardour for God and his deep compassion for his fellow men,[13] his willingness to spend himself for Christ and his patient endurance as a 'martyr to disease and pain',[14] and his extraordinary and almost super-human exertions for the sake of the Gospel.[15] Like Bates, whom he drew upon, he also emphasised the unearthly quality of Baxter's life as one who breathed deeply the spirit of heaven, carrying 'its very atmosphere of holy love about him'. For this reason Baxter is singled out by Orme as occupying a 'distinguished place' in the mansions of the blessed'.[16]

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[12] John Cale Miller, *A Lecture on Churchmen and Dissenters* (Birmingham: Benjamin Hall, 1862), pp. 7-8. Here Miller, citing an earlier work, seeks to drive a wedge between the old dissent represented by Baxter and the radical dissent of the nineteenth century. For further context see Larsen, 'Victorian nonconformity', pp. 465-7.

[13] Orme, 'Life', pp. 131-2.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 739, 786.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 321.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Yet Orme was also very concerned to establish Baxter's character as a godly nonconformist, emphasising his key role in the ecclesiastical struggles of the seventeenth century. Here, very much following in the spiritual tradition of the *Abridgement of Mr Baxter's Narrative of his Life and Times* (1702) and the *Account* of the ejected ministers, both by Edmund Calamy (1671-1732), he depicted Baxter as the champion of nonconformity. Of Baxter and the fathers of nonconformity he says that 'the Church and the world were not worthy of them, but they were counted not only worthy to believe, but also to suffer for the sake of Christ; and their names will be held in everlasting remembrance'.[17] Here the theme of martyr, which held such fascination for the Victorians, is transposed onto a wider canvas: that of persecution for the sake of the Gospel.[18] Speaking directly to his Anglican opponents, Orme says that those who think of Baxter 'only as a sectarian, or a wrangling controversialist, must now regard him with admiration, exercising the faith and patience of the saints; braving danger, enduring pain, despising life, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God'.[19] This is amplified further in his account of Baxter's later trial before the infamous Judge Jeffreys, where we are made to see, in the words of an eyewitness, 'Paul standing before Nero'.[20] Ironically, however, it is Jeffreys himself, the establishment figure, who offers the most

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 244.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 336.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 349.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 362. Baxter's trial before Judge Jeffreys was a popular theme in Victorian writing and the subject of a famous painting by Edward Matthew Ward (1816-79). See, for instance, Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II, volume i* (1848; Boston: Phillips, Samson and Co., 1849), pp. 385-8.

fitting verdict on Baxter's character, observing sarcastically to the court 'we have had to do with other sorts of persons but now we have to do with a saint'.[21]

While Orme undoubtedly championed Baxter's nonconformity he by no means neglected his 'catholic spirit', remarking of his desire for honourable comprehension that he 'hoped for that which is reserved for happier times than his own, or than has yet blessed the Church of God'.[22] Precisely the same tendency can be seen in another nineteenth-century populariser of the Puritans, J. C. Ryle (1816-1900), the influential evangelical Bishop of Liverpool. Writing in his 1890 *Light from Old Times*, a work which represents a distinctively Anglican *and* evangelical attempt to construct a spiritual genealogy, Ryle remarked of Baxter that 'he could be as zealous as a crusader for the rights of conscience, and yet he was of so catholic a spirit that he loved all who loved Jesus Christ in sincerity'.[23] Like Orme, he also drew attention to the unearthly character of Baxter's 'eminent personal holiness', comparing him to the Apostle Paul as an 'epistle of Christ' written for the benefit of the English people.[24]

Besides his great admiration for his preaching and pastoring – which he says made the 'face of paradise' appear in Kidderminster – Ryle focuses especially on Baxter's conduct in 1662 and its aftermath.[25] Referring to him as 'one of the most patient martyrs for conscience sake that England has ever seen', Ryle says of him that he exemplified that 'dying daily,

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[21] Orme, 'Life', p. 359.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[23] J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times*; *or Protestant Facts and Men* (London: William Hunt, 1891), pp. v-xxix.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 324-5.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 325-8.

which to some natures, is worse even than dying at the stake'.[26] Although an Anglican, Ryle deplored the behaviour of his fellow churchmen who persecuted Baxter, describing the Act of Uniformity as a 'crowning piece of folly' and saying that 'a more impolitic and disgraceful deed never disfigured the annals of a Protestant Church'. Although Ryle did not try to claim the 'saintly old Puritan' for the Anglican Church in the way that some of his Broad Church contemporaries did, he recognised in Baxter and his fellow Puritans the one redeeming feature of the seventeenth-century Church. Many of those ejected he says 'were the best, the ablest, and the holiest ministers of the day'. This 'noble host' were the 'saints of the nation' to whom England owes 'an unpaid debt of gratitude'. Chief among them was Richard Baxter and he thus concludes that 'it is no small thing to be the fellow-countryman of Richard Baxter'.[27] For Ryle, Baxter was clearly a torchbearer of the Gospel in a benighted age. If not quite a forerunner of evangelical Anglicanism, he certainly represented the spirit that motivated evangelical Anglicans in their quest for a reformed Church of England and rapprochement with their nonconformist brethren.

A final evangelical example of quite a different stamp is that of Sir James Stephen (1789-1859), son of the noted abolitionist and father of Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), the well-known Victorian agnostic and first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Like his son, Stephen senior was fascinated by great lives, but with a very different focus. In his *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (1849), which, in drawing on Francis of Assisi, Pascal and the Jesuits represented an ecumenical attempt to construct a spiritual genealogy of activist, evangelical piety, Stephen gave important place to Baxter. Reflecting a more diffuse evangelicalism, Stephen held that Baxter should be assigned an 'elevated rank' amongst

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 331-4.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 339, 304, 316, 335.

those who have taken 'the spiritual improvement of mankind for their province'.[28] As a bookish man of action he was especially drawn to Baxter's practical writings, of which he said that 'among the writings of uninspired men, there are none better fitted to awaken, to invigorate, to enlarge, or to console the mind, which can raise itself to such celestial colloquy'. Reacting snobbishly against Orme's republication of them in octavo format, Stephen remarks 'let not the spirits of the mighty dead be thus evoked from their majestic shrines to animate the dwarfish structures of our bookselling generation'.[29]

Tellingly, such a comment reflects not only his elitism, but also the sense of the sacred and noumenal which pervades his treatment of Baxter.[30] While this reminds us of Venn, his wife's grandfather, it arguably goes beyond this. For Stephen clearly sees Baxter as an ideal type not only of the evangelical Christian – his treatment of Baxter's 'hallowed' marriage draws on the sentimental and familial piety he was steeped in – but also of the spiritual man.[31] It is Baxter's concern for spiritual improvement, his pastoral labours, which he compares to those of apostles and angels, and his 'habitual communion with light' which truly fire his imagination.[32] In Stephen's hands the evangelicalism that he had inherited from his Clapham forebears was remoulded into a broader, more inclusive spirituality, reflecting allegiance to a general 'radiance from above' rather more than the chapter and verse of

[28] Sir James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, etc., 1849), ii, pp. 1-2.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, 25.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-8; cf. B. W. Young, *The Victorian Eighteenth Century: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 110-12.

[32] Stephen, *Essays*, ii, pp. 15-16, 25.

Scripture.[33] At the same time, it had by no means yet lost contact with its own biblical distinctives or its missionary imperative. Describing Baxter's 'revenge' on the authorities who imprisoned him as obtaining the original charter for the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, he calls this 'a return of good for evil for which his name might well displace those of some of the saints in the calendar'.[34]

3. Catholic Christian

While Orme and Ryle both manifested a deep appreciation for Baxter's catholicity, it was Stephen especially who was drawn to his 'mere Christianity'. Baxter epitomised Stephen's own project for a universal Christianity free from the rancour of confessional division. In this he notably demonstrates an important affinity with the great Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the spiritual 'father of the Broad Church movement', and the man who saw deepest into the revolutionary implications of Baxter's thought.[35] For not only was Coleridge almost unique in ascribing value to Baxter's distinctive theological method, he also, more significantly, championed Baxter's charitable ecclesiology.[36] In Baxter he gave his own liberal Anglican followers a prophet of their own latitudinarian ideals.

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[33] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[35] Tod Jones, *The Broad Church: The Biography of a Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003), p. 43.

[36] In his *Logic* Coleridge made the remarkable claim that Baxter's trichotomous logic anticipated the transcendentalist thought of Kant by more than a century: see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols to date

Coleridge's interest in Baxter can be dated back to at least 1802 when he first expressed his desire to write about the Presbyterians and Baxterians of the reign of Charles II. In the same year his friend Charles Lamb (1775-1834) bought him a copy of Baxter's *Holy Commonwealth*. Coleridge certainly read and admired this work and its constitutional principles, for he used an extended passage as epigraph for an essay in *The Friend*.[37] Coleridge's later *Marginalia* includes extensive annotations on Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, as well as some notes on his *Catholick Theologie*. Indeed his annotations on Baxter were particularly dear to Coleridge and one copy of his *Aids to Reflection* records his hope to publish further annotations on Bishop Leighton along with those on Baxter and other seventeenth-century divines under the projected title *The Inward Life and Growth of a Christian.*[38] He also planned another book on 'Revolutionary Minds' which would have included discussion of Baxter alongside Aquinas, Scotus, Luther and others.[39] While unfortunately he never completed either of these works, leaving his annotations unpublished and becoming distracted from 'Revolutionary Minds' by his *Opus Maximum*, these proposals do serve to indicate his enduring fascination with Baxter.[40]

While strongly attracted by Baxter's philosophical principles, Coleridge was drawn most of all by his autobiography, the *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, which was to him that 'most

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(London: Routledge, 1969-), xiii, pp. 241-2. The philosophical and theological affinity between Baxter and Coleridge is deserving of detailed study.

[37] Coleridge, *Works*, xii, p. 232; iv, p. 197.

[38] *Ibid.*, ix, p. 155n.

[39] *Ibid.*, x, p. 134n.

[40] Coleridge's editors suggest that his idea to write on 'Revolutionary Minds' formed the seed of his *Opus Maximum*: see *Works*, xv, p. xciii.

inestimable book'. He annotated this book around 1811, seemingly twice over (for we have two differing copies), writing extensive marginal comments, sometimes running to several pages, on passages of particular interest. On the flyleaf to one set of annotations Coleridge declared himself to be a 'bigot to no party', adding: 'highly do I approve of Baxter's conduct, affectionately admire and bless his peace-seeking spirit, and coincide with him as to the necessity of Church discipline in a Christian Church'.[41] For Coleridge one of the great benefits of reading the *Reliquiae* was its 'conquest of party and sectarian prejudices'. Thus although he in fact held Baxter's 'middle way' to be futile and deplored his liturgical views, he still admired the 'mildness of the proposer's temper' and his charitable attempts to heal the breaches of the Church.[42] In this way he found in Baxter a kindred spirit and a true saint of the Anglican Church.

For Coleridge, Baxter was the glorious hero in the tragic drama of the Restoration Church; a period which he described as the 'leprosy' and 'infamy of the Church'. Opposed to Baxter and his nonconformist brethren he ranged Charles II and the 'Herodian Diocesans' as the villains of the piece.[43] Of these he viewed Archbishop Sheldon (1598-1677), 'the most virulent enemy and poisoner of the English Church', as chief culprit, referring to Bishop Gardiner (c. 1495x8-1555), the anti-hero of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, as canonisable in comparison![44] Their persecution of Baxter was not only cruel, but an act of singular

[41] *Ibid.*, xii, p. 242.

[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 280-1. For Coleridge's objections to Baxter's liturgical views see pp. 242, 308-11.

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 250, 253.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 255.

ingratitude to the man Coleridge held had done most to bring about the Restoration itself.[45] He admired more than anything the dignity and piety of Baxter and the nonconformists, referring to them as 'perhaps the largest collective number of learned and zealous, discreet and holy ministers that one age and one Church was ever blest with, and whose authority in every considerable point is in favor [sic] of our Church and against the present dissenters from it'. He therefore bemoans the attempts of his fellow Anglicans to justify the actions of the episcopate of those days, declaring Baxter and his friends and not the High Church of Laud and Sheldon to be the true representatives of the Church of England of that period.[46]

Concerning Baxter himself he waxes lyrical, saying: 'It is impossible to read Baxter without hesitating which to admire most, the uncommon clearness (perspicuity and perspicacity) of his understanding, or the candour and charity of his spirit. Under such accursed persecutions he feels and reasons more like an angel than a man.'[47] He is to Coleridge not only an angel but also 'an eminent saint of God'.[48] As he put it, in words later oft to be repeated, 'I may not unfrequently doubt Baxter's memory or even his competence, in consequence of his particular modes of thinking; but I could almost as soon doubt the Gospel verity as his veracity.'[49] He also recognised in Baxter a particular innocence, at one point remarking on his 'child-like simplicity'[50] and at another commenting that 'Richard

[45] *Ibid.*, xiv, p. 364.

[46] *Ibid.*, xii, pp. 353, 357.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 273.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 259.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 306.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 285

Baxter was too thoroughly good for any experience to make him worldly wise'.[51] Indeed he regarded Baxter as peculiarly anointed by God, being 'substanziated and successively potenziated by an especial divine grace' which enabled him to endure 'such unremitting and almost unheard of bodily derangements and pains'.[52] Knowing all too well the anguish of bodily pain, he yet felt his own sufferings to be dwarfed in comparison to Baxter's and marvelled that they seem to have impeded him so little, a fact which even made him waver in his customary scepticism towards miracles.[53]

Yet the point to which Coleridge returned again and again, and which certainly impressed itself most on liberally inclined nineteenth-century churchmen, was Baxter's superlative charity towards his fellow Christians. Illustrating this in his *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge cites the 'following golden passage' from the *Reliquiae* in which Baxter mentions his change in heart about the salvation of Catholics: 'And I can never believe that a man may not be saved by that religion, which doth but bring him to the true love of God and to a heavenly mind and life: nor that God will ever cast a soul into hell, that truly loveth him.' In the paragraph immediately before this Coleridge had famously declared his belief that Unitarians and even Jews could be considered as fellow Christians and here Baxter's example prompts him to a similar remark about Roman Catholics. Indeed it is no surprise that

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 335.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 344.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 299. For Coleridge's dismissal of Baxter's account of miraculous healing see p. 298.

Coleridge declared himself to be of exactly the same mind in this issue as that 'man of true catholic spirit and apostolic zeal, Richard Baxter'.[54]

While Coleridge and Baxter would have locked horns over the issues of episcopacy and the liturgy they shared a similar view of the proper constitution of the Church of England. Thus in distinguishing between the *enclesia* of the national Church as an estate of the realm governed by its laws and constitution, and the *ecclesia* of the invisible Church as encompassing all sincere lovers of God whatever their confession, he clearly follows, whether consciously or not, the Baxterian distinction between the charity to be extended to all believers and the Church's need for a definite constitutional structure. Indeed Coleridge's view that Catholics must be excluded from the national Church because of their higher political allegiance to the Pope, which motivated his opposition to the Catholic Emancipation Bill, mirrors closely Baxter's own critique of the Roman Catholics which he had cited favourably earlier in the *Aids to Reflection*.[55]

Coleridge's liberal views on Christian identity, in many respects so redolent of Baxter's own, exercised a deep influence on that loose grouping of mid-century Anglican thinkers variously (and perhaps misleadingly) described as 'Broad Churchmen' and 'Liberal Anglicans' and whose intellectual and spiritual influences stemmed from a variety of sources, including German idealism, the erastian reformism of Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) and the

[54] *Ibid.*, ix, pp. 212-13. It should be noted that Coleridge makes this remark of Baxter only in the context of his views about Roman Catholicism and was certainly well aware of Baxter's opposition towards Socinianism.

[55] *Ibid.*, xii, pp. 212-13; cf. Jones, *Broad Church*, pp. 38-9. Of course such political reasoning was by no means unique to Baxter, but the combination of political opposition and breadth of charity displayed by Coleridge is thoroughly Baxterian.

incarnational Platonism of F.D. Maurice (1805-72).[56] Like Coleridge, a number of them found in Baxter an Anglican very much after their own heart. Thus Archdeacon Julius Hare (1795-1855), who in his younger days had frequented Coleridge's literary salons, declared in his *Victory of Faith* (1840):

> Not to go further back than the Restoration, what a blessed thing would it have been for the Church of England, and for the Church of Christ, if the endeavours of that wise and holy man, Richard Baxter, – one of the wisest and holiest whom the Spirit of God ever purified for the edification of his people, – had been met with hearts desirous, above all things, of preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace! What a blessing would it have been, if by certain discreet and timely concessions in matters of less moment, at the Savoy Conference, such faithful and gifted servants of God, as Baxter himself, and Owen, and Manton, and Flavel, and Alleine, and Philip Henry, and Howe, had been retained in the bond of Christian communion, as our fellow-servants at the altar of Christ!

He goes on to make a telling comparison between the failure of the seventeenth-century Church to include Baxter and the nonconformists to the failure of his own Church to

[56] For discussion of Coleridge's theological influence see David Thompson, *Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Enquiry, Controversy and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 69-95; for the 'Broad Church' see Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore* (London: Longman, 1995); Jones, *Broad Church*; Jeremy Morris, *F. D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

comprehend Wesley and the Methodists, thus propelling Baxter into the forefront of nineteenth-century debate about sectarian division, which Hare abhorred.[57]

With both Coleridge and Hare endorsing him so strongly it is unsurprising to find Baxter's name recurring in 'Broad Church' circles throughout the rest of the century. It is found at a critical juncture for Anglican progressives, in the fall out following the 1860 publication of *Essays and Reviews*. Often seen as the 'Broad Church Manifesto', this work promoted a liberal vision of Christianity grounded on the new, German school of biblical hermeneutics.[58] One of the contributors to this volume was Rowland Williams (1817-70), Vice-Principal of St David's College, Lampeter. His review of *Bunsen's Biblical Researches*, which was regarded as a frontal attack on the doctrine of biblical inspiration, raised a storm of protest. The situation quickly escalated and Williams was hauled before the Court of Arches to stand trial for heresy.[59] What is significant for us is that in the lengthy defence drawn up for Williams by James Fitzjames Stephen (1829-94), son of the above mentioned Sir James, Baxter was appealed to as the first witness of Williams's fundamental orthodoxy and the continuity of his biblical principles with the historical Church of England.

In particular, Baxter was co-opted by Stephen to argue the point that the Christian religion and not the Bible is the proper 'object of faith'. Here Baxter's distinction between the essentials and circumstantials of the Christian faith is presented as congruent to similar distinctions made by Richard Hooker (1554-1600) and William Chillingworth (1602-44), the spiritual heroes of the liberal Anglican tradition. Stephen was particularly at pains to establish

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[57] Julius Hare, *Victory of Faith* (London: John W. Parker, 1840), pp. 336-7.

[58] See further Victor Shea and William Whitla (eds), *Essays and Reviews: The 1860 Text and its Reading* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 1-46.

[59] Jones, *Broad Church*, pp. 258-9.

Baxter's Anglican credentials. While he conceded it as 'unhappily true' that Baxter was driven into nonconformity, he reminded the court that he was also 'an ordained and beneficed member of the Church of England' who was offered the Bishopric of Hereford at the Restoration. Particularly important to him was Baxter's inclusion in an influential manual of theology, the *Christian Institutes* (1837), penned by the impeccably orthodox old-fashioned High Churchman Christopher Wordsworth (1774-1846) which, Stephen told his listeners, was intended by its author to set out the 'fundamental principles of the Church of England'.[60]

Stephen pressed the point that Williams and Baxter were in complete agreement, both affirming the 'characteristic doctrine of the Church of England that Scripture is perfect for the object for which it is intended'. For Stephen, however, the comparison between the two men went beyond doctrinal similarity, for he clearly regarded them as brother sufferers for the cause of truth. Baxter, he cleverly reminded the assembled Lords Spiritual, was also brought to trial on the basis of something he had written – his *Paraphrases of the New Testament* – and charged with subverting the doctrine of the Church of England. However, in this 'shameful prosecution', 'one of the most disgraceful that ever took place in an English court of justice', no mention was ever made of his views on biblical inspiration, even though they were apparent to all. The twofold implication was clear. Not only were Baxter's liberal views of Scripture entirely in line with Anglicanism, but to condemn Williams for holding them would be to commit an injustice to which not even the notorious Judge Jeffreys had stooped. To anyone who still had the temerity to doubt Baxter's Anglican credentials Stephen had the following to say: 'I would say that in the whole list of eminent writers of the English Church a holier or a more learned man than Baxter could not be found. If it is worth while to adduce

[60] James Fitzjames Stephen, *Defence of the Rev. Rowland Williams D.D.* (London: Smith, Elder, 1862), pp. 92-4, 129-31.

testimonies to his character in these respects, I could adduce enough, I think, to silence all question upon that matter.'[61]

Williams was a member of the circle of Dean Stanley (1815-81) and of Benjamin Jowett (1817-93), who was a co-contributor to *Essays and Reviews*. In 1875 Stanley was invited to give an address at the unveiling of Baxter's statute in Kidderminster. In it he depicted Baxter, 'this ever-dying saint', as the prophet who, if alive in his own era, would 'have opened upon us that consuming fire of his love for truth'. Pointing to the new inscription on the statue – 'in a stormy and divided age he advocated unity and comprehension' – Stanley read it as a message for the divided Church of the nineteenth century. Appealing to Baxter's famous programme of 'mere Christianity', Stanley connected it with his own doctrinal minimalism. In particular, Baxter's opposition to religious tests clearly resonated with his own views. He thus saw Baxter as the 'champion of scrupulous consciences' and the standard bearer of a 'Christian liberality … far beyond his age'. For Stanley, Baxter was a prophet of the coming age of Church unity, and he referred to his prescient last words – 'I would as willingly be a martyr for charity as for faith' – as 'a speech pregnant in far-reaching consequences, the very seed of the Church of the Future'.[62]

In similar vein Stanley also recognised in Baxter a modern and progressive spirit and an ally against the conservative orthodoxy of his own day. In fact he saw an intimate link between Baxter's desire for comprehension and his theological breadth, remarking that 'with this larger view of Christian communion, the whole horizon of Christian thought was enlarged also'. Especially notable for Stanley was the role that Baxter played in Rowland Williams's trial when, as Stanley put it, 'the cause of theological inquiry pleaded for its life

[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 128-31.

[62] Stanley, 'Baxter', pp. 391-6.

before the tribunals of our Church and country'. Like Stephen, Stanley anachronistically saw Baxter's biblical principles as anticipating liberal hermeneutics. Likewise, in attacking what Stanley called the 'scholastic, Lutheran, or Puritan view of "imputed righteousness" and "substitution"', he saw in Baxter a champion of the 'moral and spiritual doctrine of Christian redemption, as set forth in the Gospels and Epistles, or in the most philosophic of German and English divines'. Baxter's confidence in the 'internal evidence of religion' was therefore 'as deeply rooted in his soul as in that of Coleridge, or Arnold, or Carlyle'.[63] In this interpretation Baxter fore-echoes a moral and spiritual, less dogmatic, form of Christianity, something obviously entirely congenial to the aspirations of Stanley and his circle.

In 1891, in one of a series of biographical sermons preached at Westminster Abbey, Jowett offered his own tribute. His admiration for Baxter, whom he called 'one of the greatest Englishmen not only of his own but of any time', was evident throughout the sermon. 'Wonderful stories are told of the effects of his preaching. It might be said of him that as the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, so did the people of Kidderminster at the preaching of Richard Baxter'.[64] In his willingness to suffer for the sake of the Gospel he found a fit comparison between Baxter and St Paul. Indeed Jowett referred to Baxter's whole life as a 'sermon for posterity', saying of him that:

> When we hear of such men and their labours, who combined the persevering industry of the great scholar with the moral force of a hero and a leader of man kind, we are apt to say, 'There were giants on the earth in those days'. It would be better to say,

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 394.

[64] Benjamin Jowett, *Scripture and Truth: Dissertations by the Late Benjamin Jowett* (London: H. Frowde, 1907), p. 227.

> that they were the sons of God who fought not in their own strength – one man more than a thousand, for they endured as seeing him who is invisible.[65]

In Baxter Jowett clearly saw a hero of the Christian tradition and an 'eminent servant of God'. More than that, however, Jowett also recognised in Baxter a true Anglican saint, one who upheld a comprehensive ideal but recognised the need for charity in doing so. The sanctity Jowett found so laudable revolved not so much around Baxter's espousal of unchanging virtues as in his ability to rise above the prejudices of his age; to see beyond forms to the deeper realities that lay behind them. Anyone in the nineteenth century who sought to emulate him 'would not raise questions about the rites of the church, or the canonicity of the books of Scripture: these belong to criticism and ecclesiastical history, not to the spiritual life'.[66] His choice to preach on a leading nonconformist in the heartland of the Church was no doubt deliberate. For like Stanley before him Jowett recognised in Baxter an important bridge between establishment and dissent, embodying his own desire for union and comprehension. Like Coleridge, he saw in Baxter the saviour of the Church of England, pointing to Baxter's refusal, at a critical juncture in the reign of James II, to join the Catholics in a league against the Anglicans. 'Certainly', he says, 'no one ever conferred a greater benefit on the Church of England or on the country.'[67]

Two important biographies of Baxter published in the late nineteenth century by clergymen of distinctly Broad Church hues indicate the esteem in which he continued to be held. They also demonstrate Baxter's appeal to more philosophically- and sacramentally-

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[65] *Ibid.*, p.229.

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 241.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

oriented Maurician Broad Churchmen, as well as to Arnoldians like Stanley and Jowett.[68] The first biography, published in 1883, was by G. D. Boyle (1828-1901), the Dean of Salisbury. Boyle had not only been invited to contribute to *Essays and Reviews*, but was also a friend of Newman and a cautious supporter of the Oxford Movement.[69] For Boyle, himself a former Vicar of Kidderminster, Baxter was both a hero of the faith worthy of comparison with Chrysostom, Anselm and Francis Xavier, and a man who synthesised and anticipated the best aspects of nineteenth-century Christianity: the evangelical zeal of Charles Simeon (1759-1836), the missionary fervour of George Selwyn (1809-78) and the peacemaking spirit of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and F. D. Maurice himself.[70]

The second biography, published in 1887, was by John Hamilton Davies, a more obscure clergyman. Davies likewise compared Baxter to a host of Catholic saints such as Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Xavier and Ignatius Loyola, but his chief emphasis was on Baxter's affinities with German idealism and romanticism.[71] In Schleiermachean manner he held Baxter to have preached that 'absolute dependence upon God, which is the essence of religion', and like Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) to have taught that religion is the

[68] For this distinction see Jeremy Morris, 'The spirit of comprehension: examining the Broad Church synthesis in England', *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 75 (2006), 423-43.

[69] A. R. Buckland, 'Boyle, Geoffrey', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford DNB.*

[70] George Boyle, *Richard Baxter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), pp. 35-6, 39, 41.

[71] John Hamilton Davies, *The Life of Richard Baxter of Kidderminster, Preacher and Prisoner* (London: Church of England Book Society, 1887), pp. 17-18.

'inner spirit which penetrates all our thoughts and actions, and immerses them in itself'.[72] Here we find again the Coleridgean, philosophical appreciation of Baxter, now fused with an important prophetical and even ascetic dimension:

> With all the ardour of his soul, with the tender entreaty of his kindly heart – his face, pale and worn by frequent suffering, kindling as with celestial fire – he exhorted them to look beyond the outline of the present state, and to the serene and compensating future, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.[73]

Like Boyle, who viewed Baxter as essentially a moderate episcopalian, Davies had no problem in recruiting Baxter to the Anglican cause. Both compared him to Hooker, demonstrating again just how far we have moved away from Orme.[74] Davies saw Baxter's own Anglicanism as embodying practical faith, tolerance and breadth of charity. In its non-dogmatic character it was grounded on the Sermon of the Mount as the 'Magna Charta' of Christianity.[75] Once again we find Davies sounding out the same themes as Coleridge, Stanley and Jowett before him, suggesting that Baxter was by now regarded as something of a 'Broad Church' patron saint.

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[72] *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 123, 147. For connections between nineteenth-century Anglicanism and German philosophy see Timothy Gouldstone, *The Rise and Decline of Anglican Idealism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[73] Davies, *Life*, p. 35.

[74] Boyle, *Baxter*, pp. 100-4; Davies, *Life*, pp. 20-1, 24. Orme, 'Life', pp. 16-17 strongly attacked Hooker and his legacy as well as the 'almost superstitious veneration' in which they were held in his own day.

[75] Davies, *Life*, p. 158.

Finally, we must remark on the veneration in which Baxter was held among the Unitarians, as evidence for the extreme elasticity of the Broad Church ideal. The connection between Baxter's so-called 'rational dissent' and the Unitarian movement – a development it is worth noting would have horrified Baxter – was remarked on frequently in the nineteenth century. Thus Coleridge, himself once a Unitarian, commented on Baxter's Sabellian tendencies and noted that the English Presbyterians, of whom he had been the leader, formed the core of the later Unitarian movement.[76] Likewise, Alexander Gordon (1814-1931), the Unitarian historian, described him, with Locke, as 'most potent among the influential sources which tended to the progressive liberalising of the old dissent'. Elsewhere he went further, calling him the 'founder of liberal Nonconformity'. In representing a 'Catholicism beyond parties' he held that Baxter was able to forge a new route for nonconformity, away from the rigid orthodoxy of earlier Puritans. In Baxter he therefore discerned the 'germs of enlightened conviction, which time and experience have since fructified to greater issues than were dreamed of in the seventeenth century'.[77]

Gordon was by no means alone in his views. In his Kidderminster address Stanley referred to Baxter as 'the first parent of the extreme school of Nonconformity', describing him as unfurling the 'banner of tolerance and freedom' before the Churches. As evidence for this claim he cited letters from two prominent Unitarians. The first, from J. J. Tayler (1797-1869), spoke of 'Baxter, whom we are proud to claim as our spiritual progenitor'. It described his mind as pre-eminently a progressive one, growing in freedom and insight, and expanding

[76] Coleridge, *Works*, xii, pp. 249, 346. Elsewhere, Coleridge admitted the absurdity of connecting the Unitarians to old dissent: *Works*, xiv, p. 492.

[77] Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (London: Philip Green, 1895), p. 31 and 'Baxter as a founder of liberal nonconformity', in *Heads*, pp. 97, 101.

in love to the very last'. The second was from the famous Unitarian James Martineau (1805-1900), a close associate of Stanley and other liberal Anglicans, who claimed that 'our spiritual ancestry is undoubtedly found in the Baxterian line'. He clearly recognised in Baxter the point of transition from a dogmatic to a moral and spiritual Christianity. Martineau concluded his letter by deploring the tendency of Unitarians after Priestley to form a separate party, saying 'I wish I could say that in departing from the theology of Baxter, we were faithful to the catholicity which has given us the power to change'. In losing this breadth and tolerance he feared that Unitarians are 'fast losing the noblest feature of our historical position, and handing over the future to those who inherit a less [sic] freedom, but appreciate and exercise a greater'.[78]

4. Conclusion

In 1914 a small group of Unitarian ministers banded together to form the Society of Free Catholics. Inspired by Martineau, F. D. Maurice and the Catholic modernists their desire was to found a Church which combined Catholic sacramental and devotional practice with theological freedom. Their membership included Anglicans, Catholics and nonconformists. Notably, the Society represented an attempt to move away from the dogmatism of the contemporary institutional Church, including the Unitarian Church itself. One of the founding members of this Society was J. M. Lloyd Thomas (1868-1955), known today for his abridgement of Baxter's *Reliquiae*, who described Baxter as a saint of 'seraphic ardour of devotion'. Like Stanley he also saw in Baxter a prophet for the twentieth century, standing

[78] Cited from Stanley, 'Baxter', p. 394.

for a 'Catholicism against all sects'.[79] Indeed, he called Baxter 'a father in the faith' for the Free Catholics and held that the Society's principle of theological freedom derived from Baxter's own desire to 'exclude none that Christ would have received'. While the Society of Free Catholics was short lived, foundering in the early 1920s, its existence is testimony to the deep sway that Baxter's tolerant ideals continued to exercise throughout the long nineteenth century.[80] It thus provides yet more evidence of the Victorian cult of St Richard Baxter.

[79] J. M. Lloyd Thomas, 'Introductory essay', in *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London: Dent & Sons, 1925), pp. xxiii-iv.

[80] For discussion of the Society and its connections to Baxter see Elaine Kaye, 'Heirs of Richard Baxter? The Society of Free Catholics, 1914-1928', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 58 (2007), 256-72.